**Independent Living as a Counter-Narrative: A Work of Resistance and Repair**

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**Plain English Summary**

**Source:**

**Introduction**

In this paper I explore the idea of ‘independent living’, which was created by the disabled people’s movement. Independent living says that disabled people have the right to have control over their own lives and equal choices and opportunities as non-disabled people. I examine how independent living creates new ways of thinking about disabled people, and how it helps individual disabled people to think about their own lives. In some countries disabled people are campaigning for independent living to be put into policy and law. I explore problems that occur when this happens and consider how these could be prevented.

## Summary of the approach

I argue that independent living is a ‘counter-narrative’, or a way of challenging existing ideas about what disabled people are like and developing new ideas about disabled people. I selected documents written by disabled activists in the UK between 1966 and 2015 and examined what they said about disabled people’s lives and independent living. Every time independent living was discussed in the documents, I noted all the themes that were associated with it. I then looked at how the authors used those themes to create new ideas about disabled people and the lives that they should be able to lead.

**Summary of main arguments**

The authors of the documents said that people usually think that disabled people are different from everyone else, and that they are imperfect or incomplete and need to be ‘corrected’ to fit in with the non-disabled world. They used independent living to oppose all of these ideas.

The themes that the authors connected to independent living fell into three groups. These were self-determination, social inclusion, and citizenship (including equality and rights). The authors used these ideas to challenge existing social expectations and create new identities for disabled people. They showed disabled people that they had a right to be themselves and live the way they chose instead of the way that other people thought was right.

An important aspect of independent living was that it focused strongly on the fact that each person is an individual. This complemented the powerful collective principle in the disabled people’s movement, which prioritises working together to find solutions to difficulties and barriers that all disabled people face. Independent living created the space for each disabled person to focus on him or herself but also be part of a group with an important shared experience. However, it also meant that there was a risk that independent living might undermine the collective power of disabled people, particularly in places where governments are already discouraging collective approaches.

Because independent living is a radical idea that changes how we think about disabled people, disabled activists in some places have campaigned for it to be put into policy and law. If policy and law support independent living, it has the potential to create particularly powerful social change that benefits disabled people. In the UK, disabled people have been successful in campaigning for independent living, and independent living is talked about in both policy and law. But despite this success, disabled people in the UK are still not able to achieve independent living and some are saying that things are actually getting worse.

One reason for this is that resources to support disabled people are being cut in many areas, like benefits and social care. But another problem is that independent living is not being properly incorporated into law and policy. Some disabled activists believe that the idea of independent living is being intentionally misused in policy to make it look as if there is support for disabled people when there is not. This is something that needs to be explored more.

It is also likely that key elements of independent living don’t work properly in policy and law because the radical nature of independent living has not been properly understood by the people who write policy and legal documents. I suggest that independent living can only be properly incorporated into policy and law once people recognise that its purpose is to change the whole way that we think about disabled people. One way we could do this is by incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, as this also challenges existing ideas about disabled people.

**Summary of main implications**

Independent living is a matter of social justice which has the potential to transform disabled people’s lives and enable disabled people to live on an equal basis with others. Evidence from the UK suggests that if this potential is to be realised, independent living must be put into policy and law, but that this must be done carefully. It will only work if the radical nature of independent living is properly understood. If this is not the case, the policy could even damage disabled people’s lives and opportunities. It will also be important for disabled people’s movements in different places to develop forms of independent living that are appropriate for local cultures and customs, and to make sure that the important focus on the individual does not undermine collective action.

**More information**

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Contact: [tarrantae2@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:tarrantae2@cardiff.ac.uk)